TranspoRTAtion

Summer 1988

A quarterly newsletter of the Regional Transportation Authority

Rebuilding The RTA System

Making Mass Transit Work In The Suburbs

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From the Chairman

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Volume 1, Number 1

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"Commuter Hell": Dan Ryan Expressway under construction until November, 1990.

TranspoRTAtion is published quarterly by the Regional Transportation Authority
Public Affairs Department
One North Dearborn Street, Suite 1100
Chicago, Illinois 60602
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Photography: Matt Ferguson
Printing: Williams, Weiler & Haeger, Inc.

TranspoRTAtion, the first edition of which you are now holding, represents the rare coincidence of form and content: the purpose of this newsletter is to inform interested observers of happenings at the Regional Transportation Authority; *TranspoRTAtion* is one of those happenings.

Last year was a very eventful one at the RTA. We expect that 1988 will be even moreso, and we have initiated this publication to keep legislators, the press, peer agencies and interested citizens apprised of our projects, problems and progress.

This first quarterly issue addresses three ongoing projects, in various stages of completion, which represent what the RTA is doing now, where it intends to be in the future and how it will get there.

First, and most important, is RTA's Strategic Plan, the blueprint for a renewed, regional transportation network that will take the region's 19th Century transit system and extend it into the 21st Century. This massive undertaking—the dynamics of which are outlined herein—has been RTA's primary objective since its reorganization four years ago. Last year saw significant progress towards its implementation, and this year should see it underway.

Second, and related to the Strategic Plan, is an article discussing RTA's increasing awareness of the region's emerging suburban transit markets. The intense self-analysis of the strategic planning process has helped RTA identify these growing needs and has established new market initiatives as a major element of the Plan.

Finally is a feature on RTA's new, expanded and vastly improved Travel Information Center (TIC). After more than two years of research and preparation RTA unveiled the world's premiere transit information facility last November. This invaluable customer service now costs less to operate than before, does more, and will be even further refined in '88—a prime example of RTA's determination to provide its riders with the best possible transportation services.

To put it mildly, these are busy, vital, even heady days at the RTA, and we look forward to sharing our progress with our reader/owner/customers in future issues of *TranspoRTAtion*.

Samuel K. Skinner
Chairman, RTA

Aging Gracefully

RTA's Strategic Plan Aims To Get Its 19th Century Physical Plant Through The 21st

This CTA elevated station is unusually dilapidated, but not unusual enough. The great majority of CTA's 140 rapid transit stations are in need of significant repair.

In the 20th century, cities have come to be identified as much by their transportation systems as by their architecture or geography. San Francisco, of course, is famous for its cable cars; New York is renowned for its subway system and London for its double-decker buses. The elevated trains of Chicago, similarly, not only played a critical role in the city's development, but have emblemized it to non-natives—as much as have the Lake, the Sears Tower, or the Bears—for almost a century.

That's the problem.

The Harrison-to-University Avenue link of the CTA's North/South line was erected for the Columbian Exposition of 1892. It and several other elevated lines have been standing for virtually 100 years under the constant strain of rapid transit and Chicago weather. They are old, worn and in imminent need of restoration. Unfortunately, this does not make them unique in the RTA system.

Chicago's transit system is not only one of the nation's largest, but one of its oldest, and the "El" lines are only the most obvious exemplars of its very slow but steady deterioration. According to several engineering studies commissioned in recent years, a preponderance of the RTA's physical assets—from 70-year-old railroad bridges to 30-year-old rapid transit cars to 15-year-old buses—are at or near the ends of their useful lives. Although none of these assets poses any present threat to passenger safety, their structural needs must be met before they do.

To combat this decay and maintain the viability of its vital resources, the RTA has undertaken an extensive and intensive planning process designed to: (1) answer the system's structural needs; (2) extend it into emerging suburban transit markets; and, (3) to develop new funding sources to pay for objectives 1 & 2. The first point represents an enormous challenge in construction and engineering, the second a real test of system-planning foresight and imagination. The third point, however, is the tough one. The estimated cost of restoring RTA's assets to "good" operating condition by the year 2000 is $6.1 billion in 1987 dollars.

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The Quincy Street El station was, until recently, not much better off than its counterpart, above. A two-year restoration project returned it to its 1890s luster and structural stability.

Escape From Busurbia

Making Mass Transit Work In The Suburbs

The sign says it all. As the suburbs approach automotive gridlock, public mass transportation becomes an increasingly feasible and attractive option.

The most common, potent and, perhaps, most accurate symbol of the American suburb is the automobile. The most common, potent and, certainly, harmful symbol of suburban mass transportation is the bus—the frequently empty bus, which is not ridden because it simply does not provide the convenience of that revered automobile.

Suburbia, as we all know, is the land of the automobile. It is, in fact, the land made by and, largely, for the automobile. Today, however, the automobile is playing an entirely new role in the realm it created. Today it is the automobile that not only transforms the suburb from a housing development into a town, but from a town into a traffic jam.

Since 1970 Chicago's suburbs have held the majority of the metropolitan area's population; since 1980 they have also held the greater number of the region's jobs. The result of this comprehensive shift in balance has been intensive, seemingly random real estate development in suburbia, where shopping malls and office complexes seem to pop up like umbrellas in a storm.

This break-neck development has made large-scale population and employment centers of areas which were only recently rural or low-density residential, and has transformed the small-volume roads built to accomodate their previous needs into major traffic arterials.

Consequently, the landscape made possible by the automobile is now being threatened by the automobile. A one-hour commute to one's office in the next town is not what suburbia is supposed to be about.

The solution to this problem would appear to be obvious: when private transportation fails, public mass transportation must be the logical answer. Reality, however, seldom bows to logic. To the extent that it has been attempted, traditional mass transit has not worked especially—or even moderately—well in the suburbs. The challenge confront-

Metra, the RTA's commuter rail operator, transports 260,000 daily riders between more than 230 commuter stations in 100 suburban communities and the city of Chicago.

ing both elements of this dilemma—the suburbs facing traffic strangulation, and mass transportation agencies struggling to provide service to the country's largest and fastest-growing population centers—is how to find a balance; how to accommodate the needs and desires of suburban commuters to the abilities of public transportation providers.

The landscape made possible by the automobile is now being threatened by the automobile

It is to this end that the Regional Transportation Authority has directed new concern and focus, a concern and focus that is likely to continue. If, however, 1987 was RTA's "Year of the Suburbs," it is only the first in what will prove to be a vital and significant era.

The restructuring of RTA by the Illinois General Assembly in 1983 stands as a watershed event in the agency's history. In part due to concerns of suburban legislators that the suburbs have a greater voice in transportation policy, the General Assembly established two operating divisions within the RTA—the Commuter Rail Division and the Suburban Bus Division—and created independant Boards of Directors for each. The Boards of these divisions, now known as Metra and Pace, are suburban-controlled.

A result of that restructuring has been a much greater voice for the suburbs. Metra and Pace have dramatically increased their visibility in the suburbs through aggressive advertising and marketing campaigns and they have been accepted as active partners in the Northeastern Illinois transportation industry.

It is not, of course, fair to suggest that suburban mass transportation is not without its devotees. Each day, for

Notice which vehicle has the right-of-way.

Pace, the RTA's suburban bus operator, provides fixed-route and paratransit bus service to more than 200 communities and the city of Chicago.

example, 40,000 suburbanites board Metra trains—mostly to commute to the City—and they undoubtedly wonder why so many motorists contend with the congestion on the parallel expressways as Metra speeds by. The overwhelming majority of commuter rail travel, however, is between suburban satellite stations and Chicago's central business district (CBD). The most common commute in the United States today—the one which will continue to grow the fastest, the one causing the most problems, and the one with which public transportation has had least success—is the inter-suburban work-trip.

In 1980 almost 48% of all work-trips made in the Chicago/RTA region had both their origin and destination in the suburbs. Only an insignificant fraction of these trips are carried by public transportation. Increased inter-suburban commuting, therefore, translates almost directly into increased suburban traffic congestion. If it is to remain the land of the private automobile, suburbia must accept either of two equally unappealing alternatives: it must either learn to live with present and steadily increasing traffic levels, or it must radically alter its environment by constructing more and larger thoroughfares.

A third option—the most unlikely—is to change the nature of the suburbs. That's neither realistic nor desirable, so another scenario is needed. If the suburbs are to retain their character, they must make some sort of accomodation with mass transportation; if mass transportation agencies—such as the RTA—are to win and keep new suburban ridership, they must accomodate themselves to the peculiar needs of those riders and their environment.

In 1987 the RTA demonstrated a major new awareness of suburban transportation interests and concerns. Between May and October of last year RTA sponsored three highly productive workshops on the subject of transportation options for the metropolitan area's three most populous suburban counties.

The sites were chosen in descending order of urgency, beginning in DuPage County in May, proceeding to Suburban Cook County in July, and moving to Lake County in October. In each case RTA enlisted the aid of a nation-wide, not-for-profit planning agency (the Urban Land Institute, the Institute of Transportation Engineers, and the American Planning Association, respectively) to organize the conferences, to select panelists and commentators and to establish agendas.

Study panels consisted of both local and national traffic, transportation, employment, government and planning experts who spent two days touring and analyzing traffic hot-spots in the county under discussion. Their study periods were followed by a day of brainstorming and debate with audiences composed of local business, development and municipal leaders, and a final day on which conclusions were drawn and possible solutions recommended.

Each conference is to be followed by a published report on the proceedings and conclusions. The first of these, "Building For The Future: Transportation Solutions For DuPage County, Illinois" was released by the Urban Land Institute in December. The second, Transportation Options For Suburban Cook County," was published by the Institute of Transportation Engineers in March.

The findings of each of these work-

(L to R) RTA Director David DeMotte of DuPage County, DuPage County Commissioner Jack Kneupfer and RTA Chairman Sam Skinner at last Spring's conference, "Transportation Options For DuPage County".

shops were similar, as were their suggestions. Whereas traffic volume in the suburbs is at or approaching untenable levels, suburban population and employment dispersement make fixed-guideway transit systems, such as subways and streetcars, impracticable. On the other hand, traditional, fixed route bus service is, for the most part, both unpopular and ineffective. The answer, therefore, may lie in more customized mass transportation services and close cooperation between the public and private sectors.

On the first count, customized service, RTA is working, through Pace, its suburban bus division, to implement innovative delivery systems based on individual large employers. It is exploring the feasibility of van-pooling and leasing arrangements; of express buses; of special buses designed to service particular sub-divisions or office complexes; and of distributor systems in high concentration areas such as the Woodfield and Oakbrook mall/office developments.

On its second charge, working more cooperatively with private interests, RTA has been quite active. In July the agency approved an $80,000 challenge grant for the Northwest Municipal Conference, an association of north-suburban municipalities, to create a Transportation Management Association called Transpart. A similar seed grant is being provided to the South Suburban Mayors & Managers Association. This idea is also being explored under the leadership of Lake County and of Peter Haverkampf, senior vice president of Homart Co., the development arm of Sears, Roebuck—along the major north-suburban arterial of Lake-Cook Road.

RTA is, seeking, furthermore, to encourage joint developments in the suburbs, planning commercial clusters around transit stations in order to focus the heretofore haphazard building distribution which presently makes suburban transit so difficult.

Although mass transit's primary constituency lies and will, for the foreseeable future, continue to lie in urban centers, transportation agencies' attention will inevitably shift more and more to the suburbs, for it is there that their greatest challenges and potential lay. If, however, 1987 saw an increasing awareness of suburban concerns by the RTA, an awareness that continues into 1988, it is not to the exclusion, or at the expense, of the established urban core. RTA's new suburban awareness does not so much redirect the agency as propel it in the dynamic direction it had explored only tentatively in the past. The transitional demography of the suburbs and the relatively stable demography of the city demand regional solutions, are equally problematic and will receive equally strong commitments of both effort and dollars. Obviously, the RTA must maintain its commitment to its oldest, biggest and most natural constituency—the City. On the other hand, the agency can, by no means, ignore the increasingly populous, influential and rapidly changing landscape of Suburbia.

In this period of greater harmony with the suburbs, the goal of the RTA is to become a catalyst for change and as useful, constructive and essential a force throughout its six-county region as it has long been within the City of Chicago and its in-lying suburbs. It intends to arrive at that goal on time, in comfort, and at a reasonable price. ●

Pace operates 88 feeder routes, connecting it to 107 commuter rail and rapid transit stations.

State Of The Art

RTA's New And Vastly Improved Travel Information Center Is, Without Exception, The World's Finest

A two-and-one-half-year effort to provide Chicago area public transportation users with the nation's most advanced system of getting current transit information culminated late last year when the RTA opened its new, state-of-the-art Travel Information Center on the 10th floor of One North Dearborn Street, directly below RTA offices.

The new TIC is open every day of the year and is expected to handle more than 3 million incoming telephone calls in 1988 — making it the busiest transit travel center in the United States.

Each day, an average of 8,500 calls are received from prospective users of the RTA system (CTA, Metra and Pace) who are in need of schedule or fare information, directions to specific locations (How do you get to Wrigley Field from Hanover Park?) or other instructions.

Callers are answered by one of 30 or more trained information agents who have access to data stored in a sophisticated computer system that will show not only the route and fare information for that particular route, but also a map of the route, a local street map, and a street guide for every community in the RTA area.

In less than a minute, the caller will have received his or her information and, hopefully, be on the way to the bus or train. Although response time is generally fast, demand increases sharply in inclement weather or during the time of special events (Taste of Chicago, Christmas Shopping Season, major musical events, etc.).

Even though the new system has been in operation for less than half a year thus far, it has already won praise from transit users in the Chicago area and from computer and information specialists from throughout the United States. In fact, the RTA's Travel Information Center has become so popular as a tour facility that RTA staff have been forced to establish tour requirements to regulate the flow of visitors. Among recent visitors were representatives of Seitu, the Mass Transit Information System of Paris, France, and more than 100 participants at a Chicago computer trade show.

The Transportation Committee of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry held a recent luncheon meeting at the RTA as part of its tour of the TIC.

What the tourists have been seeing, and what has been providing information to those 8,500 callers each day, is an entirely new system — from the work location and work stations ... to the data retrieval system ... to the telephones ... even to the information agents who are answering the telephones.

The new RTA Travel Information Center is totally new and is the result of a 33-month review and planning project.

In early 1985, prompted largely by increasing costs to repair outdated equipment and by complaints of difficulties in getting through to the Travel Information Center, RTA staff began an analysis of the current operation and looked at information facilities at other transit systems, most notably a new information system at the center in Washington, D.C.

By the end of 1985, staff determined that improvement of the TIC was sufficiently important that it was included as one of the major goals of 1986.

RTA's new Travel Information Center dispenses information on routes, schedules and fares to an average of 8,500 callers per day. The 3 million inquiries it expects to handle this year will make it the busiest facility of its type in the U.S.

Early in 1986, the RTA took several steps toward resolving short term problems and developing a long-term solution. On a short term basis, additional telephone lines were added to increase caller capacity and RTA staff began monitoring TIC operations to measure quality and quantity of service.

The RTA's Budget Analysis Division also conducted an analysis of the TIC's costs.

In April, 1986, an experiment was conducted to determine the impact of additional staffing at the TIC.

As a result of the early reviews, the RTA Board amended the operating contract to allow expansion of staff at the TIC. The combination of a larger staff and additional phone lines increased the call capacity but did not (and was not expected to) solve the total problem.

The first steps toward solving the larger problems were outlined for the RTA Board in July, 1986, when staff proposed development of a fully computerized information retrieval system and relocation of the TIC to RTA property.

Following the Board's agreement, a Board Committee was formed (Directors Danoff, Parker, Vaughn and Walsh) to work with staff.

Through the balance of 1986, staff worked to implement the Board-approved recommendations and, in November, an ordinance was approved authorizing construction of a new TIC at One North Dearborn Street, conveniently adjacent to RTA's offices.

While construction progressed on the new facility, three "Requests for Proposals" were prepared by RTA staff and consultants for the three main elements of the new facility: a telecommunications system; a computerized data storage and retrieval system; and an operator for the TIC.

A painstaking review process followed the receipt of proposals and contracts were awarded by the RTA Board of Directors as follows:

- On June 4, 1987, to Illinois Bell Communications for installation of a telecommunications system;
- On July 14, 1987, to Plexus Computers, Inc., for installation of a data storage and retrieval system; and
- On August 6, 1987, to Advanced Telemarketing Corporation to operate the Travel Information Center.

(The RTA, incidentally, is the only transit system in the United States to use a private contractor to provide manpower and day-to-day operations of its information facility. Several other systems, however, are exploring going to the private sector, based largely on the RTA's success.)

Installation of the new systems began almost immediately and, in the case of ATC, hiring and training of telephone agents began on September 7, 1987.

Just one month later — on October 8, 1987 — the first telephone calls from RTA riders were taken at the new TIC as part of a phased cut-over.

And on Monday, November 2, 1987, at 3:30 p.m., the final switch was thrown transferring all calls from the old TIC to the new RTA Travel Information Center.

The new TIC has the potential to handle about twice as many calls as were handled before the conversion and relocation. At the present time, the demand indicates a need for a 25 to 30 percent increase in capacity, and the RTA has been able to meet that demand with virtually no increase in the annual operating cost. ●

Aging Gracefully

continued from page 3

Before it is possible to comprehend the magnitude of RTA's capital need, however, one must first comprehend the magnitude of the RTA.

The RTA and its service boards—Pace, Metra and the Chicago Transit Authority—serve a six-county region which covers 3,700 square miles (an area roughly as large as the State of Connecticut) and contains 7.3 million residents and 2.6 million jobs.

RTA controls more than 5,000 transit vehicles and operates 375 passenger stations connected by over 1,500 miles of track. On an asset-basis its $14.5 billion physical plant makes RTA second only to AMOCO as Illinois's largest business entity and second only to New York's MTA as the largest transit system in North America.

A recent commercial for one of the world's leading airlines boasts that the number of miles its craft fly each year—150 million—is greater than the distance from the Earth to Mars and back again. In 1986 the number of passenger miles covered by RTA was almost 175 million, or that same distance plus about 1,000 extra trips around the world.

In fact, the number of passengers transported by RTA every day, 2.6 million, is greater than that of all major airlines combined. It is also greater than the populations of 19 of the 50 states. In 1986 RTA carried more than 750 million passengers, which equalled more than 10 percent of all American transit ridership.

RTA is, in other words, a very substantial property serving a very substantial socio-economic base. The option not to maintain a resource of this size and value with a function so essential to regional well-being simply does not exist. To pour 750 million additional commuters per year onto the regional road network would be a civic, economic and environmental disaster; to allow the system to degenerate further would be not only unethical but completely contrary to RTA's purpose.

Enter the Strategic Plan.

The idea of strategic planning does not, on its surface, appear a particularly novel one; especially as regards a $14.5 billion entity. Every well-run business should have one.

The business of public transportation, however, has only recently come to be regarded *as* business and, therefore, subject to its principles. Only one other public transportation property in the world—London Transit—has undertaken a strategic planning process so thorough, or on a scale so large as that of RTA. Many more will, of necessity, follow, but RTA is in the vanguard of the new brand of professional management which is making public transportation agencies into public transportation businesses.

Now that RTA has committed itself to strategic planning, it has done so with a vengeance. The planning process has been the agency's primary concern since its reorganization in 1983, and has now reached a crucial stage. In April, the RTA Board unanimously adopted a Strategic Plan which establishes—among other things—a five-point list of goals and objectives which provide a framework for implementation of the plan. These goals and objectives call for RTA to do the following:

- To adopt a market-driven framework for capital and operating decision-making.
- To bring its capital assets to good condition by the year 2000 and maintain them within funding limits, as prioritized by market policy.
- To minimize cost per unit of service while maintaining or improving the quality of service.
- To ensure timely and predicatble multi-year funding for strategic planning objectives.
- To build the political, legislative and public support necessary to implement

RTA Chairman Samuel K. Skinner, Executive Director Theodore G. Weigle, Jr., and CTA Executive Director Robert Paaswell testify before the Joint House Senate Transportation Committee of the Illinois General Assembly on RTA's pressing capital needs.

the strategic plan.

These goals and objectives will shape RTA's action, at both the strategic and the tactical level, for the remainder of the century. They establish what kind of services RTA wishes to provide, how it will provide those services, how it will finance them, and what will be the criteria for their success. They provide the mirror in which RTA will finally be able to clearly see the shape it's in.

The immediate result of RTA's strategic planning process, therefore, has been a greatly enhanced understanding of the agency's composition, its needs and abilities, and the needs and nature of the people that it serves; the long-term result will be a significantly reconstructed, redirected and rededicated organization which will help bind together the continually expanding and increasingly interdependent elements of the Chicago region.

The RTA of the 21st Century—the RTA which will be built throughout the 1990s and which will be the end-product of the Strategic Plan—will be not only physically, but operationally and financially stronger and better able to serve its constituents throughout the region than at any time since its original construction. And this is not just a prediction; it's in the Strategic Plan. ●

RTA's Strategic Plan aims to restore its aging infrastructure inside-out and from top to bottom.

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In Transit

Recent Movement At The RTA

Wyatt

Leffers

Gaudette

Hake

Schlickman

McGuire

For the first time since its restructuring in 1983 the RTA Board of Directors stands at full strength. The nomination of the **Rev. Addie Wyatt** by Chicago Mayor Eugene Sawyer was easily approved by the Chicago City Council, and Rev. Wyatt filled the Board's sole unoccupied seat at the RTA's February board meeting.

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In early January RTA's staff was reorganized into a form better suited to what RTA Executive Director **Theodore G. Weigle, Jr.** termed its "evolving mission".

The former Finance Department, renamed Budget and Financial Management, was streamlined to address only those two functions, while its erstwhile capital and strategic financial planning functions were spun off into the new Program & Capital Development department. This group also assumed the systems planning and market development tasks formerly performed by the Planning Department. Budget and Financial Management is now headed by **Dan Leffers**, formerly RTA's Division Manager - Budget and Finance, while Program and Capital Development is directed by Assistant Executive Director **John J. Gaudette**.

While essentially retaining its traditional functions, the office of External Relations was rechristened Public Affairs and had its component duties further clarified.

After all planned positions have been filled, RTA's staffing level will remain at the pre-reorganization mark of 72 personnel.

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Another of the recent changes in RTA's organizational chart is the addition of the Office of Inspector General. **Terrence Hake**, who came to public attention as an undercover agent in the Operation Greylord investigation of corruption in the Cook County court system, assumed this important new position on February 1. Heading a staff that will eventually reach six members, Terry greatly enhances the RTA's auditing and investigative capability, and strengthens its ability to perform its legislatively mandated oversight function.

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While its responsibilities have remained essentially unchanged, RTA's Public Affairs department has been structurally enhanced by the appointment of a Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. **Stephen Schlickman** came to the RTA from the Chicago Transit Authority on January 4 to assume this position as point man in RTA's quest for urgently needed capital funds.

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Also new to RTA is **Patricia McGuire**, who became the agency's Controller and Treasurer on March 28. Pat is a CPA via the University of Notre Dame, and comes to RTA after 12 years with Children's Memorial Hospital, the last seven as Controller. As Controller Pat joins RTA's Department of Budget and Finance and assumes responsibility for its financial mangement activities.

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Regional Transportation Authority